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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with expression in composition. Expression includes the unity, coherence, and emphasis/purpose of a paper, and its style and/or tone. The paper first gives four alternative definitions of style and offers some specific components of style, such as word choices, sentence structures, and imagery. It then presents and discusses the following common problems related to style: wordiness; redundancy (related to wordiness); excessive use of "who," "which," "that"; unnecessary intensifiers or hedges; too many prepositional phrases; overuse of "be"; overuse of the passive voice; choppy sentences; and lack of sentence variety. Finally, the paper enumerates and elaborates 10 ways to overcome problems and improve style: (1) modeling; (2) imitation; (3) word games; (4) using figurative language; (5) sentence combining; (6) expanding sentence versatility; (7) sentence imitation; (8) sentence variety; (9) copy change; and (10) role play the registers. Contains an 11-item bibliography. (NKA)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

CS 216 898

Improving Style in Students' Written Compositions
by Elaine Danielson Fowler

Most everyone agrees that two major elements of any composition include the principles of organization and of expression. The concern in this paper is with expression. Expression includes the unity, coherence and emphasis/purpose of a paper--and its style and/or tone. Whereas guidelines for unity, coherence and purpose are usually clear and relatively universal, the guidelines for style depend upon circumstances--the subject of the paper, the purpose, the audience and the occasion. People are also sometimes unclear about what style is because it is defined in various ways.

Definitions of Style

What is style? Examples might be useful to explain the concept before several definitions are given. Teach the same dance step to three or four different people, and each will do it in his or her own style. Ask several people to introduce themselves at a party, and each will do it in his or her own style. Everyone has a personal style, but some people seem to have "more style" than others. A professional basketball star not only scores points, but does it with ease and grace (Michael Jordon). A famous singer not only has a well-trained voice, but presents the song in a special way (Wynona, Aretha Franklin, Johnny Mathis). Many of the Hollywood stars we admire have this kind of style. It is the extra polish that grows out of knowledge, practice, and skill. It takes time and hard work to acquire this kind of style. But it seems to be worth the effort ($$$).

Definition 1. So what does style mean in written composition? Style can be defined as the expression of the author's personality--his attitudes toward himself, his world in general, and his immediate subject and audience in particular. In concrete terms, style is the total effect of a writer's decisions--his choice of words and sentence structures, his selection of details, images and rhetorical patterns (Hawley, 1977).

Definition 2. Style is the way something is put, and people who put things well are said to have "a way with words" (Neman, 1980). As Neman says, style is more than window dressing. It is not something spread over the content like frosting on a cake. The way you say something is as important as (some would say more important than) what you have to say. Here is an example of two ways to say the same thing: The girl was reluctant to leave. She just didn't want to go nohow. The denotative (specific, concrete) meanings of these two sentences are, for all practical purposes, identical, but the connotative (implied) meanings differ widely. The girl and her feelings may be the same, but the way she is observed

and reported and, consequently, the way she will be perceived by the reader are entirely different. Though the style of neither sentence accounts for its total meaning, the difference in the styles of the two sentences accounts for the difference in their meanings. The content provides a passage with its explicit or denotative meaning; style, the way the content is expressed, provides the implicit or connotative meaning (Neman, 1980).

Definitions 3 and 4: Kirby and Liner (1988) say that a writer's style is the sound of a voice on the page. And Norton (1997) says that an author's stye refers to how an author says something rather than what the author says. At any rate, style is an important contributor to the essential meaning of a passage of speech or writing. Because style is part of meaning, it can be evaluated only in terms of how well it contributes to the intended meaning of the whole. In other words, bad style occurs when there is an incompatibility between the connotative (implied) and denotative (specific, direct) meanings. The greater the harmony between the connotative and the denotative meanings, the better the style. Thus, style cannot be evaluated out of context. Though "She just didn't want to go nohow," would be inappropriate written by an author who was attempting an essay in standard English and could be judged "bad" style in that context, it might be very good style from the mouth of a mountaineer narrator in a passage where "The girl was reluctant to leave" would be pretentious and inappropriate (Neman, 1980, p.206).

Components of Style

What are some specific components of style? Usually style has to do with word choices, phrase or sentence arrangements and imagery that contribute to the total whole of the piece. Some of the elements are discussed in more detail below.

1. Word Choices. For example, instead of writing: *Judy came into the room*, it is better to be more precise: *Judy walked/crawled/bounced/leaped/slithered/stomped/sauntered into the room.* Awareness of connotations is an important aspect of word choice. The skillful writer can get additional impact from clear, rational prose if s/he uses words which carry the right connotations for the audience. There are many sets of words in English that have only slight denotative differences but large connotative ones. The differences among fat, plump, corpulent, obese and chubby, for instance, are entirely connotative, but that fact does not make them any less real.

2. Sentence Structures. Sentence structures are, of necessity, universal and conventional among speakers of the language. The

writer's problem is to fit his sentence length and complexity to the situation. In general, writers should strive for variety in sentence length and structure. The following (Provost, 1985, p. 80) demonstrate sentences that do not vary in length: *This sentence has five words. Here are five more words. Five-word sentences are fine. But several together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is getting boring. The sound of it drones.* Kirby and Liner (1988) reinforce the idea of the importance of sentences and state that to write effectively, a writer must be able to manipulate sentences and that one of the most basic understandings a writer must acquire is sentence sense (p. 369).

Imagery. Imagery is as effective in prose as in poetry--similes, metaphor, personification, and metonymy occur in many everyday phrases. They can be useful to the writer for explaining unfamiliar things or concepts as well as for adding concreteness and variety to his style. A simile is a direct comparison in which two things, essentially unlike, are likened to one another. The comparison is made explicit by the use of like or as. (*He is like a slug in the morning.)* A metaphor is an implicit comparison in which two unlike things are likened to each other without the use of like or as. A metaphor can make abstract ideas concrete. (*She is an angel.*) Personification means attributing to inanimate objects and abstractions human qualities. It is closely related to metaphor. In fact, personification is sometimes called "personal metaphor." The tendency to ascribe life to inanimate objects seems to be universal.: (*Love is blind.*) (De'Angelo, 1977). And metonymy is when a part (or something closely related) stands for the whole, for example, when the word the "brain" is used in place of the person's name. *(We'll ask the brain to tell us the answer.)*

Common Problems Related to Style.

Now that some components of style have been identified--choosing inviting words, varying sentence structures and using imagery into a piece--what happens that gets in a writer's way? What are some of the common problems that occur and what can be done about them?

1. Wordiness. Writers need to be concise. Perhaps the most widely recognized virtue of good prose style is conciseness. Much has been said in English classes about the importance of eliminating unnecessary words. Setting a maximum length for a paper can actually a useful way of encouraging conciseness (Hawley, 1975). Since most of this wordiness is caused by the writer's not knowing precisely what he means to say, it is also true that wordiness is a indication of imprecision in the use of language. Here are some of

the most common "wordy" phrases and possible single-word alternatives.

Wordy phrases	Single-word Alternatives
due to the fact that	because
in view of the fact that	why
the reason for	since
for the reason that	for
despite the fact that	though
regardless of the fact that	although
in reference to	about
it is necessary that	must
there is a need for	should
as a matter of fact	actually
in the event that	if

2. Redundancy is related to wordiness also. Writing is redundant when it includes unnecessary repetition. Redundant words add nothing but padding. Here are some examples of redundant pairs of words: each and every, hopes and desires, first and foremost. Here are some phrases that are redundant: blue in color, a period of time, a month of the year. These phrases give unnecessary information Readers already know blue is a color; telling them something is blue in color repeats the obvious. Instead of *"The shirt was blue in color."* write *"The shirt was blue."*

3. Excessive use of who, which, that. The use of who, which, or that is often optional. Where such words are necessary to make the meaning of the sentence clear, they should be used. But when the sense is clear without them, they can be removed. In most cases, the result will be a more economical, more natural-sounding sentence. For example, *"Susan is a girl who likes cigars"* is more economically expressed as *"Susan likes cigars".*

4. Unnecessary intensifiers or hedges. We use intensifiers such as of course, very, really, clearly, etc. to strengthen statements. The sentence *"I am really tired"* suggests that the speaker is more than normally tired. Using the intensifier in this sentence is fine, but substituting a more forceful word for hungry (and eliminating the intensifier) would be even more effective: *"I am exhausted."* Sometimes intensifiers are unnecessary because the words to which they are attached are already as strong as possible. The sentence: It is very unique, for example, makes no sense. Something either is or is not unique; it cannot be "very" or "slightly" unique. In addition to intensifiers, we also use hedges such as: apparently, very, really, clearly, a need, of course, to strengthen statements. We also use hedges such as: apparently, seem, possibly, to a certain extent, tend,

and somewhat to qualify statements and allow exceptions. Writers also use hedges to add subtlety to their prose--and to appear careful and thoughtful. But when used excessively and for no specific reason, hedges make writing tentative and uncertain and less worthy of a reader's attention.

5. Too many prepositional phrases. Prepositional phrases are used to indicate possession and location in time and space. Used well, they give writing good balance and clear emphasis. Too many prepositional phrases, however, make sentences hard to read.. Writing dominated by strings of prepositional phrases tends to be wordy and monotonous. By eliminating some of the prepositional phrases, the number of words can be reduced and make the meaning clearer. A simple way to monitor prepositional phrases in writing is to circle all the prepositions.

6. Overuse of be. The most common verb in the English language is the linking verb, be. Its forms include is, was, am are, were being, been. Be is called a linking verb because is acts as an equal sign, connecting the subject with the predicate. As a verb, then, be actually carries little weight since it does not allow the subject to perform much action upon the predicate. Consequently, writing dominated by "be" verbs is generally quite static. Strengthening the verbs adds vigor to the writing, but it also does a good deal more. It reduces wordiness and it enhances clarity. Greater clarity results primarily from placing the action where is belongs-- in the verb-- instead of burying it in the subject. Circling all the "be" verbs that are used is a way to check to see if there are too many. If they are found in every sentence, if the writing seems static, or if the action of each sentence is fuzzy rather than sharp, finding other verbs that will better carry the action is a good option.

7. Overuse of the passive voice. A passive construction is formed by combining the verb be or get with the past participle of another verb: "The project was designed by Jones and her associates." Writers often use passive sentences when they desire anonymity or when they believe the action is more important than the actor. Many passive constructions do not even identify the agent performing the action. Thus, the passive predominates in scientific research reports in which the agent is assumed to be the experimenter, and repeatedly naming him or her would be redundant. In addition to fostering obscurity rather than clarity, passive constructions reverse the natural subject+verb+object order of English sentences and, when used excessively, make writing sluggish and difficult to read. It's best to use passives only when the

writer must report information impersonally or when the writer does not want the readers to know who is responsible for an action.

8. Choppy sentences. One common writing fault is choppy sentences. Well-made sentences are the basis of good writing. Choppy sentences are awkward and stiff. They prevent ideas from flowing easily. Worst of all, they may cause the reader to lose interest in the message. There is no rule about length of sentences in English. Long sentences are not better than short sentences; short sentences are not better than long. However, a paper made up of too many short sentences may sound immature, and a paper made up of too many lengthy sentences is likely to sound boring. Here is an example of a paragraph that contains choppy sentences.

The rain fell. It fell for four days. It overflowed in the creeks and rivers. It dripped constantly from the tree branches. It filled the sky with gray clouds.

9. Lack of sentence variety. Avoiding monotony in writing is an important consideration. The normal order for an English sentence is subject+ verb+ object, but if every sentence in a paper runs in normal order, the reader might go to sleep. Sometimes it is good to juxtapose them to add variety and emphasis. In order to achieve variety, a person could vary the beginnings of sentences: For example:

a. Begin with a prepositional phrase--<u>After the rain</u>, the party resumed.

b. Begin with more than one prepositional phrase. <u>In the morning, after the rain stopped</u>, the children went to the playground.

c. Begin with a simile--<u>Like a slug</u>, Marvin began his daily rounds.

d. Begin with an adjective or several adjectives. <u>Big, strong, powerful</u> Stanley could not even begin to move the rock.

e. Begin with an appositive--Shirley, <u>the fireman's daughter</u>, set the blaze.

f. Begin with an infinite-- <u>To run</u> to the store was impossible.

g. Begin with a modifying clause-- Start with a subordinator (after although, as, as if , because, before, if, since, though, unless, until, when, whenever,where, wherever, while): <u>When teachers are in front of the class</u>, they expect you to listen.

h. Begin with a noun clause. Start with a relative pronoun or one of the subordinators(that, what, whatever, when , where, wherever, which, who, whoever, whom, whomever, whose , why): <u>Who has already finished</u>, will win the game.

i. Begin with a participle--<u>Jumping</u> off the cliff was the next move.

j**Ten ways to overcome problems and improve style.**

1. Modeling. A good way to help students get the idea of what style means in any kind of composition is to have students compose the same message in three different styles with the teacher taking dictation. The teacher could choose a short message--perhaps an invitation to a party, a description of a small object or a thank-you note to someone. The objective of the lesson is to write the same message in each of three styles which the teacher and students choose and create together. A slang style, a business writing style or a legal style could be chosen. This exercise would help students understand that the audience dictates the style that should be used.

2. Imitation. Another way to improve style can be achieved is by imitation. This idea assumes that in imitating the best features of a writer's style you will produce writing that in time will come to rival the model itself. For this exercise, the teacher and students choose a passage from a novel or short story and reword it into another style. Doing the exercise together first before the students do it independently is best. The students can choose any style they want. They can choose a formal style, a jargon-filled technical style, or a persuasive, business writing style. The style of a children's picture book or a personal interest story in a newspaper could also serve as models. A fairy tale or a fable they they've read could be reworded into another style. Or the student could write a rap version or an exaggerated and flowery version of a fairy tale.

3. Word games. Word choices are always important when considering style. It was Mark Twain who said that the difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter--the difference between the lightening bug and the lightening. Some activities that could be done in the class include:

(a) Hink Pinks. Hink Pinks are short rhymes that either take the form of an answer to a riddle or describe something. It is more or less understood that the identity of the item is announced in the question. For example: I have a Hink Pink. It is a obese feline. Answer: fat cat

(b) Tom Swifties. A Tom Swifty is a line of dialogue that ends with a whimisically appropriate adverb. For example. "The highway pollution is terrible," Tom said exhaustedly.

(c) Test frames. Test frames are put in special sentences with slots left in the blank that only words of a certain class can fill. Here is a test frame for adjectives. The _____cat was sleeping on the rug.

(c) Word Wall. Words that could substitute for "throw," for example, are put on a chart on the wall. Words could include toss, fling, eject, cast, sling, lob, hurl. etc.

(e) Word of the day. A word of the day could be put on a bulletin board with its definition. A sentence that uses the word would also be posted. Students try to use the word throughout the day in other meaningful sentences.

4. Using Figurative Language. The figurative meaning of a word is based on a comparison of unlike things. The common figures of speech used by prose writers are the simile, the metaphor and personification. On the other hand, the literary meaning of a word is its explicit primary meaning, its usual and customary meaning as opposed to its figurative meaning. The purpose of the figure of speech is to create a picture, to make an idea clear and forceful through comparison. Students should understand that writers use figures of speech in order to increase concreteness and to secure vividness in the writing. A figure of speech should make an image for the reader.

So, drawing pictures of familiar written similes and metaphors can help students understand figurative language. Or placing an idiom proverb, simile or metaphor on the board every day for two months, then having students reflect on its meaning and discuss it, in a half-minute activity at the end of school as everyone prepares to leave for home, would be fun. (Block, 1997). Another idea is for students to make up their own new similes or metaphors from old ones or they could go on simile and metaphor searches in the books they are reading.

5. Sentence combining. Beth Neman (1980) says: Sentence combining is of value to us not because it increases the length of students' clauses and phrases, but because it improves the overall style of the writing of most students who practice it. Sentence combining gives the student a chance to practice, to experiment and to make mistakes--all without the anguish usually associated with learning to write. Although some such anxiety is inevitable in learning any activity, especially if there is comparative discussion of the work, sentence combining reduces this discomfort to the impersonal level of, say, the math class. Sentence combining succeeds, therefore, basically because it gives students a chance to struggle with all the intricacies of writing style in as non threatening a context as is possible. William Strong (1986) says these exercises succeed, first, because in sentence combining students construct written discourse; they do not tear it down. They do not learn to analyze or diagram sentences. They learn to build and create sentences. Second, unlike most traditional grammar problems, these challenge students enough to afford them the enjoyment of intellectual stimulation. Third, through these exercises, students

have the opportunity to get on intimate terms with the sort of sentences mature authors write, to play with them and thus make them their own. And fourth, Strong says sentence combining trains a student to hold longer and longer discourse in his head-- to embed and subordinate at greater depth as a means of expressing thought.

6. Expanding sentence versatility. As has been noted, one of the most basic understandings a writer must acquire is sentence sense. This understanding can come through numerous encounters with sentences they have read. However, the following exercises could practice this objective.

(a) Moveability exercise. To teach students the range of possible positions that different phrases and clauses can occupy in a sentence is to have three volunteers come to the front of the class and give a card to each containing a phrase. Then the other students decide how many different ways the cards could be arranged. Plank(1992) reports that uppergraders--especially those who learn best when they are physically involved--enjoy "becoming the words" in sentences they are expanding or manipulating.

after school the boys played football

(b) Sentence expansion. Sentence expansion is an activity that provides practice in fleshing out "barebones"' sentences with colorful modifiers and descriptive phrases. Students begin with a sentence such as *"Lions roared,"* Then the students add words to the sentence so that in the end, the sentence might be: *The lazy, large male lion roared loudly when he didn't get his food on time* (Temple and Gillet, 1989).

(c) Scrambled sentences. This activity is where students put cut-up sentences back together again.

(d) Stand-up sentence parts. Stand-up sentence parts is like the moveability exercise, only the students hold up individual words in a sentence and the other students think of other words that could be substituted for a given student's word. If a student is holding up the verb, run, for example, other students try to think of another word for run like jumped, hopped, scampered, jogged, etc.

7. Sentence imitation. Children, generally, delight in wearing adults' shoes. As they clomp around with their feet flapping inside, they take pleasure in measuring their feet against the grown-up standard. Trying to use someone else's language is like wearing someone else's shoes. If done for an extended time, it can be crippling to limp around in another's words, but as play, it can be delightful. Imitation is a form of walking in another's language, and it can help discover more about style. (Gere, 1984, p. 304) One idea is to copy a page from a book that has a particularly powerful

message. As the teacher reads the page orally, students read along silently, then students check the sentences they like and discuss why they prefer the sentences they do. (Block, 1997 p. 304).

8. Sentence variety. Students could go on sentence searches and look through library books they are reading for especially powerful or interesting beginning or concluding sentences. The sentences they find could go on a Word Wall and be copied later in a Sentence Search booklet to which the students could refer when they want a more interesting way to begin or end their stories. Another idea to be used sparingly is the ABC story where the student work in pairs and make up a story where each new sentence must start with the next letter of the alphabet.

9. Copy change. Either provide or have the students select a descriptive paragraph, a poem, a sentence or phrase from a book and have them recopy it changing the similes or metaphors (or any part of speech) found in the piece.

10. Role play the registers. The "total whole" is close to the point that Martin Joos made in his The Five Clocks (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), in which he claimed that all of us are in command of a variety of styles or registers--to use his terms, frozen , formal, consultative, casual and intimate-- and that we shift back and forth among these styles to suit the occasion and our audience. An activity that helps children understand this important concept about appropriateness is to have them role play, asking for the same thing in the various registers: Intimate--ask your mother for money. Casual--ask your friend for money. Consultative--ask your teacher for money. Formal--ask the banker for money.

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